

HB 552

Testimony by Pat Keim on behalf of Alternatives, Inc. of Billings

Alternatives, Inc. is opposed to HB 522.

Alternatives Inc. has operated the men's and women's pre-lease centers in Billings for nearly 30 years under contract with the Department of Corrections.

We do accept level 1 and 2 sexual offenders from the Department of Corrections and the courts. We have on very rare occasions taken a level 3 offender, but those instances could be counted on one hand over the last 30 years. At Alpha House, the men's center, we average 10-12 sexual offenders under treatment and supervision at any given time. This represents less than 10% of the resident population. Sexual offenders stay for 12 months rather than the usual 6 month pre-release stay.

We do not accept all that are referred. We screen the referrals to assure that the ones we take have a heightened success rate for reintegration into the community. Each candidate is first screened by the South Central Treatment Associates prior to our consideration. If they pass that screening they are further screened by our own committee. Our committee is made up of professional councilors, representatives of law enforcement with expertise in the field, probation officials, our administrators, and board members from the community.

Accepted offenders are almost without exception undergoing treatment with a Montana Sex Offender Treatment Association (MSOTA) certified therapist during the entire period that they stay in pre-release. The counseling staff of the PRC, in conjunction with the MSOTA therapist, set rules and conditions that our residents must comply with on an individual basis, specific to the individual requirements of the case. These conditions include close monitoring for compliance and progress.

Our programs are designed to transition the offender back into the community in a structured manor that is designed to reduce the chance of re-offense. Our treatment program has been very successful. Over the years those who came through the program have had a recidivism rate of only about 1% as tracked the Department.

The alternative to these programs for inmates completing their sentence is essentially a \$100 and bus ticket home with the admonition of go and sin no more. No hour by hour monitoring while in residence, no special training and counseling, no special supervision other than that provided by the Department's parole officers. The chance for successful reintroduction into the community is reduced and perhaps the safety of the community is reduced as well.

HB 552 threatens this program. This bill as drafted would require that the local county commission give its approval for a pre-release center to have a sexual offender treatment program. Such a decision by the commissions would of course require public meetings.

It also says that the commission may decide not to vote. That decision would also require a public meeting. Either way, the matter would be a highly emotion charged political football in which it might be difficult for the commissions to make a decision in favor of the pre-release programs that actually help protect the public. It would take the treatment of sex offenders out of the hands of professionals and leave it to politics.

The bill does not differentiate between pre-release centers seeking to establish sexual offender programs and those, like our's, that already provide the programs. Page 2 lines 19 and 20 say that this bill does not apply to sexual offenders placed at a prerelease center before January 1, 2007. As stated earlier our average stay is one year, so this exemption is really meaningless. Thus our very successful program could be wiped out unless the Yellowstone County Commission decided otherwise.

It is very possible that if you pass this bill you will effectively wipe out any sexual offender treatment programs in this state. The result will be sexual offenders who have completed their sentence being released directly back into the community without any transitional counseling or monitoring.

We understand that this subject is a serious and emotional matter. But the consequences of this bill, if enacted, are also serious and potentially of great risk to public safety. We urge you to consider the very serious impact of this bill and vote it down.